



## Development of the "American" Democracy Transnational Social Movement

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### Introduction

Winston Churchill described democracy as "the worst form of government except for all those others that have been tried."<sup>[1]</sup> According to Mohamed Abed Jabri, a contemporary Arab philosopher, "democracy is the only principle of political legitimacy which is acceptable nowadays in Muslim societies."<sup>[2]</sup> Abdul Karim Soroush, an Iranian Islamic reformist, opined: "Islam and democracy are not only compatible, their association is inevitable. In a Muslim society, one without the other is not perfect."<sup>[3]</sup>

As these statements reflect, democracy has become the preferred type of governance in the world as well as the Middle East. Over sixty percent of the countries of the world are defined as electoral democracies.<sup>[4]</sup> Not surprisingly, democracy offers considerable advantages. Political scientists Bruce Russett and John R. Oneal found that "the risk of conflict declines as the proportion of democracies in the international system increases."<sup>[5]</sup> In addition to this pacifying influence, democracies are better at providing for their citizens' needs. Amartya Sen, the recipient of the 1998 Nobel Prize for Economics, demonstrated this point:

"No substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent and democratic country with a relatively free press ... [in comparison] China, although it was in many ways doing much better economically than India, still managed (unlike India) to have famine ... the largest recorded famine in world history: Nearly 30 million people died in the famine of 1958-61, while faulty government policies remained uncorrected for three full years."<sup>[6]</sup>

Moreover, *The Economist* reports "across scores of countries and centuries of history, democracy has promoted growth far more effectively and consistently than any other political system."<sup>[7]</sup>

In spite of democracy's benefits and Middle Easterners' acknowledgement of its benefits, no democracies—either liberal or electoral—exist in any Arab Middle Eastern states.<sup>[8]</sup> Most states are autocratic. In February 2005, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak called for an amendment to Article 76 of the constitution to allow for multiple candidates and parties to participate in

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presidential elections. Shortly thereafter, his security forces arrested, beat and intimidated vocal opponents—most notably former parliamentary member Ayman Nur.[9] In Jordan, King Abdallah II has made little progress on reform. Neil Hicks, Director of Human Rights First's Special Initiative on the Middle East, comments: "On paper, the Jordanian government has committed itself to many basic rights and freedoms. But... Jordan's commitment to human rights remains unfulfilled." [10] Meanwhile in Saudi Arabia, women live in a state of "gender apartheid." [11] Saudi women are not permitted to drive a vehicle, must be accompanied by a male relative to be admitted into a hospital, and have limited employment opportunities. [12] On March 11, 2002 in Mecca, fifteen girls died in a fire because Saudi Arabia's religious police refused to let the girls leave the burning building without their *hijab* and *abaya*. In fact, witnesses claimed the police were "beating young girls to prevent them from leaving the school because they were not wearing the *abaya*." [13]

Inarguably, reform is necessary and crucial to the Middle East. Following the tragic events of 9/11, President George W. Bush used the event as an impetus to remedy this Arab peculiarity and democratic deficiency. Though literature abounds regarding the doubtful efficaciousness of exogenous pressure effecting fundamental democratic changes, few scholars or commentators have satisfactorily explained the reason for such pessimism. For example Larry Diamond wrote, "Except for rare instances, democracy does not work when foreign models are imposed... Nor can Americans impose a preference for democracy where it does not exist." [14] What is missing in this equation is why. Few have addressed this question directly. Most have chosen to exhaust their energies on debating the Bush administration's sincerity and credibility. [15] A satisfactory explanation becomes more crucial as conflicting narratives emerge from the region. In an interview on March 15, 2005, Jordan's King Abdullah II stated:

"...many societies throughout the Middle East have been talking about reform, but [because] there seems to, and may be a strong American position for the Middle East to move toward reform... in Jordan it has allowed us to actually push the envelope even more. And if there hadn't been that call, then I think that we'd have been much more complacent about it." [16]

Finding a satisfactory and persuasive explanation to why external pressure is unlikely to lead to the institutionalization of democracy in the Middle East is daunting. Added to the anticipated challenges which democracy faces in heterogeneous environments, the region's complexity, and its historical and cultural aversion to foreign encroachment of any kind, exacerbates the situation. Nonetheless, the presence of these challenges does not necessarily mean the inevitable failure of democracy. A systematic method is needed to analyze the problem within context and offer objective insight to support or refute positions.

Social movement theory (SMT) provides a systematic framework of analysis. SMT offers a holistic approach for identifying and interpreting components of a public, demand-making movement as well as analyzing the interactive dynamics of these components and relations with other movements and opposing pressures. Consequently, SMT may provide greater analytical understanding to why democracy cannot be inoculated since it enables the study of both static and variable aspects. This essay represents an initial effort to illustrate that the U.S. promotion of democracy in the Middle East can be viewed within a SMT framework. More specifically, President Bush's calls for the advancement of democracy in the region have been translated by the region to mean the launching of the "American" democracy transnational social movement. Establishing that an "American" democracy transnational social movement does exist is necessary to be able to understand subsequent reactions, such as the formation of counter movements and state responses. Though as yet preliminary, viewing "American" democracy as a social movement is instrumental to comprehending the mechanisms that may retard reforms in the Middle East.

## **"American" Democracy as a Transnational Social Movement**

As Samuel P. Huntington proposed, "American" democracy is transnational. A transnational organization or social movement has "... directed operations in territories of two or more nation-states." [17] Though rare, transnational social movements do exist and are connected to national processes. Reviewing the Catholic Emancipation movement of Britain from 1780 to 1829, Tilly found that "histories... reveal powerful analogies between the processes driving social movements within national polities and a range of other processes, both 'national' and 'international.'" [18] He continued "both state-led and state-seeking [transnational in nature] nationalisms share interesting properties with social movements... they involve parallel political processes [such as claim making, opposition to power holders, identity formation, consensus building, collective action or armed confrontation]." [19] Consequently, these findings "rectify common conception of social movements as *sui generis*." [20] In addition, the international and domestic processes are in "incessant interaction" and not "quite independent one from the other." In other words, the interaction between transnational social movements and domestic social movements is not without precedent. Social movements are not simply confined to the boundaries of a state—that is, they are not uniquely a domestic formation. Further, social movements that emerge from outside of the state, interact like an indigenous movement once within the state. For example, the 1830's Protestant movement, which originated from Western nations such as Britain and the United States, sought "political change as a preface in China's spiritual conversion." [21] In their efforts to convert the Chinese, Suzanne Wilson Barnett found that "Rather than encouraging... [the] Chinese to be more receptive to Western intrusion, the missionaries inadvertently supported China's inhospitality to the West... the missionaries pinpointed threats to distinctive features of China's own civilization [they wrote of presidents and kings and not emperors, of an educational system not founded on Confucianism]. In short, the missionaries characterized China's 'enemies' and helped to perpetuate Chinese distrust of Westerners." [22]

Like the Protestant movement of 1830's, "American" democracy is a social movement. However, it is fundamentally different from missionary movements or other social movements such as Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, or the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's. While these aforementioned movements emerged from domestic non-state sources, "American" democracy is the product of the U.S. government and designed to change Middle Eastern states. Theoretically, domestic changes, i.e. new ruler, type of government, should result from internal sources, competition or pressures. Yet, the United States with its considerable political leverage—seen as its mass—and public demands is the one pressuring and effecting internal changes within sovereign polities. This realization is engendering responses which mimic reactions to social movements. Specifically, Middle Easterners are interpreting U.S. advocacy for change or democracy as a social movement or an organized campaign against the state which locals believe they should have a priority in influencing on domestic issues. Alternatively, American demands are competing with indigenous groups' perceived legitimate right to demand changes from the state, and, thereby, the United States is undermining local social movements' prerogative to decide what changes should be included on the agenda for consideration. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan may place changes in education or social affair as more important than liberal democracy, but find their preferences overshadowed by American demands. In addition, individuals are also reacting to "American" democracy. In the process of mobilizing support for change, the U.S. government has framed the region and by extension the people so negatively that many feel compelled, in spite of the realities, to defend the region and offer an alternate, competing perspective. One commentator proffered, "Respect our religion and our culture and don't interfere in our domestic affairs. Leave us alone and we can solve our own problems. We can build our own democracy by our own efforts, we don't need your help. This is our task, not yours." [23] In sum, the competition for influence over the state and framing of the region is compelling the Middle East to view and treat "American" democracy as a real social movement.

Furthermore, the fact that "American" democracy emerged from foreign policy does not detract from its character as a transnational social movement. Tilly defined social movement as "a sort of

campaign... [that] demands righting of a wrong... suffered by a well-specified population."<sup>[24]</sup> President Bush defended the promotion of democracy as part of a "broad and sustained campaign to secure our country and eradicate the evil of terrorism."<sup>[25]</sup> The similarities between Tilly's and Bush's comments extend beyond idioms. Both convey the same meaning. Also, the term "American" democracy is not meant to connote a unique brand of democracy, but simply to specify the promoter—the United States. This distinction is significant given Middle Easterners' apprehension and general mistrust of American intention even when they support the incorporation of democratic practices within their society.<sup>[26]</sup> Thus, these unfavorable views of American sponsored efforts impact Middle Easterner's reception, perception and behavior. As the Secretary General of the Islamic Action Front pondered, "How can we be convinced of the democratic reform promoted by Bush? At the same time he is asking dictatorial regimes to tighten their controls of Islamists [who lead movements of change and resistance], shut down their charitable organizations... We don't have any confidence in this reform discourse."<sup>[27]</sup> Furthermore, "American" democracy, as outlined in the Middle East Partnership Initiative, has the goal of establishing "expanded public space where democratic voices can be heard in the political process, the people have a choice in governance, and there is respect for the rule of law."<sup>[28]</sup>

President Bush follows a long legacy of foreign policy makers and is not the first American president to promote democracy in the region. As the forty-third president of the United States, he is but one in the continuum of presidents that have used or promoted democracy and its ideals. Woodrow Wilson zealously marketed democracy. He declared "The idea of America is to serve humanity... [it is] a very perilous thing to determine the foreign policy of a nation in terms of material interest."<sup>[29]</sup> Backing his words with action, in 1916 he sent forces into Mexico to "teach Mexicans the meaning of democracy."<sup>[30]</sup> In the Middle East, Truman declared "I believe... it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."<sup>[31]</sup> Ronald Reagan added "If America were to walk away from Lebanon, what chance would there be for a negotiated settlement producing, a unified, democratic Lebanon."<sup>[32]</sup>

The end of the Cold War era and concomitant collapse of the quintessential communist state ushered in the proliferation and dominance of democratic states. Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton made the promotion of democracy one of the main pillars of their foreign policy.<sup>[33]</sup> In keeping with this American tradition, President George W. Bush also embraces democracy as his key foreign policy pillar. At the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy in 2003, President Bush commented on America's stewardship and the rise of democracies. He noted:

"In June of 1982, President Ronald Reagan... declared, the turning point had arrived in history... Soviet communism had failed.... In the early 1970s, there were about 40 democracies in the world... As the 20th century ended, there were around 120 democracies in the world—and I can assure you more are on the way... We've witnessed, in little over a generation, the swiftest advance of freedom in the 2,500 year story of democracy. Historians in the future will offer their own explanations for why this happened. Yet we already know some of the reasons they will cite. It is no accident that the rise of so many democracies took place in a time when the world's most influential nation was itself a democracy."<sup>[34]</sup>

President Bush's promotion of democracy parts ways with his predecessors in that his rhetoric combined with his actions has had the psychological impact of transforming his foreign policy into a transnational social movement. President Bush's address to the nation on September 7, 2003 surmised his views. "The Middle East will either become a place of progress and peace, or it will be an exporter of violence," he stated.<sup>[35]</sup> In another venue, he described the region as "a place of tyranny and despair and anger."<sup>[36]</sup> In his choice of words, he accentuates the differences between the region and the rest of the world. In so doing, he has caused Middle Easterners to conduct a defensive reassessment of their identity as well as a reassessment of "the other" or the

United States. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia reflected this introspection during his address to the Islamic Summit Conference. He voiced:

"Today we, the whole Muslim ummah are treated with contempt and dishonour... None of our countries are truly independent. We are under pressure to conform to our oppressors' wishes about how we should behave, how we should govern our lands, how we should think even... [to] our detractors and enemies... we are all Muslims... whom they declare promotes terrorism, and we are all their sworn enemies. They will attack and kill us, invade our lands, bring down our Governments whether we are Sunnis or Syiahs, Alawait or Druze or whatever [*sic*]."[37]

While Bush may not have intended to pursue his foreign policy as a social movement, Middle Easterners have translated it as such. Ted Hopf highlights in *Social Construction of International Politics* "the power that a social cognitive structure exerts can best be illustrated in terms of language." [38] Further, through discourse identities, which are relational, are created, reinforced, or amended. In other words, verbal communication is subject to the audience's interpretation which is bound by the interpreter's sense of identity, norms, and context. Perceptions which are based on a cognitive calculus create reality. If within this social context or norm American intentions are viewed as hostile, then subsequent American actions and words are likely to be filtered through those lenses. Indeed, the Pew Research Center found evidence of this filtered interpretation. Specifically, they found that "the perception that Western nations are not fair in their stances toward Palestine fits in with a more generalized that the West is unfair to the Arab and Islamic worlds... it is one of several examples of Western bias that might extend to Afghanistan, Iraq, Gulf oil and other situations." [39] Head of the Arab American Institute James Zogby revealed in his interviews of Arabs in the region that the Middle East's opposition to the United States "... is not a foreign policy issue... It defines almost existentially their sense of who they are." [40]

## Inside the Operational Structures of "American" Democracy

The international climate in 1998 was beginning to provide the political opportunity structure for an "American" democracy social movement. On February 23rd, Osama bin Ladin issued his fatwah calling for Muslims "to kill the Americans and their allies -- civilians and military." [41] On 7 August, Al-Qa'ida attacked U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Sala'am, Tanzania. On October 28th, Israel and Palestinians signed the Wye Memorandum. The document called for Palestinians to combat terrorism. On February 7, 1999, after four decades of power King Hussein of Jordan, the region's longest ruling leader, passed away. His son Prince Abdullah, an untested leader, took his mantle. Similarly, in Syria President Hafez al-Assad died on June 10, 2000. His son Bashar al-Assad assumed the presidency. On October 12th, Al-Qa'ida attacked the U.S.S. Cole in Aden Harbor, Yemen. On September 28th, the second Palestinian *intifada*—*al Aqsa*—began. In January 2001, President George W. Bush was inaugurated. One month later, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon took power. And on September 11th, al-Qa'ida attacked the World Trade Center and Pentagon using civilian airliners as weapons. Over 3,000 people were killed. [42]

The country was shocked, angry, saddened and confused. American citizens' reactions ranged from "America should act like a superpower, no matter the cost, and take whatever action is needed to prevent terrorist groups from launching new attacks," [43] to "America needs to stand vigilant to remain as a beacon of hope for the world." [44] The international community also reacted. British Prime Minister Tony Blair commented, "We can only imagine the terror and carnage there... [this was] perpetrated by fanatics who are utterly indifferent to the sanctity of human life, and we, the democracies of this world, are going to have to come together to fight it and eradicate this evil completely from our world." Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said "Our hearts are with you and we are ready to provide any assistance at any time... [the attacks would be] a turning point in the war against international terror." French President Jacques Chirac asserted "In these terrible circumstances, all French people stand by the American people. We express our friendship and solidarity in this tragedy." Even America's adversaries extended their



condolences. Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi suggested that "Irrespective of the conflict with America it is a human duty to show sympathy with the American people, and be with them at these horrifying and awesome events which are bound to awaken human conscience." Syrian President Bashar Assad called for "world cooperation to eradicate all kinds of terrorism." Iranian President Mohammad Khatami declared "it is an international duty to try to undermine terrorism."<sup>[45]</sup>

September 11th expanded Bush's freedom of action and, thereby, the political opportunity to engage in a "systematic campaign against terrorism."<sup>[46]</sup> He had the American public as well as the international community by his side. "Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe... As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export," reasoned Bush.<sup>[47]</sup> "America's determination to actively oppose the threats of our time was formed and fixed on September the 11th, 2001. On that day we saw the cruelty of the terrorists, and we glimpsed the future they intend for us," he added.<sup>[48]</sup> To oppose these threats, the United States must build "lasting, democratic peace... by supporting the rise of democracy, and the hope and progress that democracy brings, as the alternative to hatred and terror in the broader Middle East."<sup>[49]</sup> To preempt the exportation of violence, the United States will export democracy—"American" democracy. In support of that effort, the U.S. State Department's Human Rights and Democracy Fund spending in the Middle East increased from \$205,000 in fiscal year 1998/1999 to \$9,581,850 in fiscal year 2004/2005.<sup>[50]</sup>

President Bush has a formidable mobilizing structure—that is, he has an extensive amount of resources at his disposal. Still, the terrorist attack enabled him to further augment his assets by providing him the "singular target of conflict" to rally more aid.<sup>[51]</sup> He could utilize the international organizations already advocating democracy whether directly or implicitly through their charter. In this category, he has the United Nations, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. Another category consisted of international agencies with the explicit mission of advancing American foreign policy. In this field he had the Bureau of International Organization Affairs (IO); Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL); and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Lastly, he could use his network of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO). The most prominent of which were the National Endowment for Democracy (and its subordinate organizations) and Freedom House. NED is credited to have facilitated the democratic transition of Chile and Nicaragua.<sup>[52]</sup> These highlighted organizations do not begin to capture the amount of resources Bush has access to. He could use his vast diplomatic networks to tap into ally resources, but with a Gross National Product (GNP) of \$10.99 trillion—the largest in the world—the United States can readily meet her most critical needs.<sup>[53]</sup> In essence, the United States has the discretionary funds to subcontract, hire, and implement programs with relative ease. Alternatively, Bush can exploit NGOs already present in the region. For example, in 2004 an estimated 14,000 NGOs were registered in Egypt.<sup>[54]</sup> Equally as effective, the president used and also has the media as a resource to mobilize support and frame future agendas.<sup>[55]</sup> In fact, the global media facilitated the expedient mobilizing of the international community's support for the American people. Realizing the significance of the media for mobilizing and framing, the Bush administration launched the Middle East Radio Network to convey America's message in March 2002.<sup>[56]</sup> Bush expressed "... Middle East Radio Network will offer... reliable news, and information in Arabic, and an opportunity to better understand American principles and American actions."<sup>[57]</sup> In addition to these non-violent persuasive tools, Bush has the best military in the world supported by the latest technology. Needless to say, President Bush's resource mobilization structure already well endowed became overflowing.

Bush used his gained advantages to develop a cultural framing consistent with what Charles Tilly suggested social movements aim to achieve—that is, the WUNC principle. Social movements must show their audience that they are **W**orth the demands they seek; present a **U**nified front; have the **N**umbers necessary to back their stake, and convince the public, adversary, and others

that they are Committed.[58] President Bush managed to succinctly address all elements of the WUNC principle. He asserted "Our people are united; our government is determined; our cause is right; and justice will be done. Our cause is just. We will not tire. We will not falter. And, my fellow Americans, we will not fail." To sustain support, President Bush remained flexible and altered his framing from one dominated by "security" jargon to one of "democracy." This revision enabled him to reinvigorate a traditional concept which the majority of Americans hold dear – democracy. As Glenn Robinson commented, Bush's bumper-sticker became "Stop a Terrorist... Spread Democracy!"[59]

Like past American presidents, Bush used familiar and traditional tactical repertoire to advance his objectives. Bush pressured for Middle East compliance using financial incentives and support of domestic opposition forces. For instance, the Bush administration reportedly withheld \$350 million in assistance to Egypt to protest the arrest of Saadeddin Ibrahim in 2002. The Egyptian authorities arrested Ibrahim for promoting political, civil and electoral rights. Also, the U.S. Ambassador David Welch met with Egyptian oppositional leaders. Welch defended his prerogative to meet with these leaders, and stated "I consider that a natural role of an American ambassador in any country, and a perfectly natural one here in Egypt." [60] In another example, Welch provided six Egyptian NGOs one million dollars in support of pro-democratic related activities.[61]

Though Bush pursues these non-violent means as cost effective alternatives to promoting "American" democracy, he has not been averse to using force to achieve his vision. In fact he clarified "I will do whatever it takes to defend America and prevail in the war on terror." [62] He backed those words with action. In October 2001, he invaded Afghanistan. In March 2003, he invaded Iraq. The United States is in "a war against all those who seek to export terror, and a war against those governments that support or shelter them," he explained. Bush also added, "We removed terror regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq. We are on the offensive around the world, because the best way to prevent future attacks is to go after the enemy." [63] Furthermore, Bush insisted "We seek the advance of democracy for the most practical of reasons: because democracies do not support terrorists or threaten the world with weapons of mass murder." [64]

## Conclusion

Using social movement theory allows us to systematically study dynamics to better explain and predict collective behavior. As Tilly noted we need to review various national and international activities for there are "parallels and connections that transcend geographic boundaries and scales." [65] Looking at "American" democracy through the prism of a social movement and establishing that it is a transnational social movement enables other social movement mechanisms to be analyzed. For instance, how will "American" democracy interact with host Middle Eastern states, national countermovement like Islamists, or civil society? How will these interactions, whether contentious or friendly, support or impede the establishment of democratic institutions? Using previously studied cases, analogies can be applied to study these interactions and answer the nagging riddle of why American coercive democratization of the Middle East is unlikely to lead to liberal democracies.

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